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ABSTRACT

The restricted experience of disadvantaged persons in taking employment related tests leaves them without test-taking skills. United States Department of Labor manpower experimental and demonstration manpower projects have found several approaches of use in the pretesting preparation of out of school and out of work youth and adults: special coaching on use and value of tests, pretesting in nonthreatening atmospheres, test tutoring and practice, training in test-taking skills, remedial instruction, and advance exposure to the test site. One successful program showed the value of a comprehensive program whereby, prior to final administration of the job selection test, the job seekers were provided pretesting orientation, temporary (trainee) employment, and job related basic education; also, special training was given to their supervisors on how to work effectively with disadvantaged groups. The appropriate methods for and the scope of pretesting orientation services needed by the disadvantaged will vary depending on the character of the vocational tests and the education and experience of the job applicants. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (Author/JM)

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March 1970
Joseph Seiler

ABSTRACT

Pretesting Orientation for the Disadvantaged:
Experience in Manpower Experimental and
Demonstration (E&D) Projects

Inasmuch as disadvantaged persons tend to have fairly restricted experience in taking employment and similar aptitude, intelligence and job knowledge tests, it is reasoned that the lack of such exposure leaves them without test-taking skills.

U.S. Department of Labor manpower experimental and demonstration manpower projects have explored several approaches in the pretesting preparation of out-of-school and out-of-work youth and adults. Special coaching on use and value of tests, test settings providing nonthreatening atmospheres, test tutoring and practice, curriculums for training in test-taking skills, remedial education instruction, advance exposure to the actual test site, as well as other types of pretest assistance were found useful in preparing disadvantaged persons to successfully compete on private employer and civil service job selection examinations.

One successful project showed high feasibility and value of a comprehensive program whereby prior to final administration of the job selection test the job seekers were provided pretesting orientation, temporary (trainee) employment, and job related basic education; also, special training was given to their supervisors on how to work effectively with disadvantaged groups.

Experimental and demonstration project experience seems to indicate that the appropriate methods for and scope of pretesting orientation services needed by the disadvantaged will vary depending on the character of the vocational test to be taken and the education status and testing experience of the job applicants.

March 1970
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Pretesting Orientation for the Disadvantaged: Experience in Manpower Experimental and Demonstration (E&D) Projects

The U.S. Department of Labor's experimental and demonstration program (widely known as E&D) seeks to develop and test through actual project operation, new ideas and techniques to meet manpower problems more effectively -- particularly the problems of disadvantaged worker groups.

E&D projects focus on distinctive needs and difficulties which impede a potential worker's employment and are not being met effectively by established or regular manpower service programs. Innovation to create and provide new types of manpower services and organizational arrangements is the means by which E&D attempts to better reach the hard-core unemployed, prepare them for the world-of-work, place them in jobs, and help them achieve employment stability and progression.

The national manpower program of job training for the unemployed started seven years ago with enactment of the Manpower Development and Training Act. At the outset, it was recognized that much knowledge needed to be developed for the program. In 1963 the first E&D projects were born to learn and to teach by doing, to explore feasibility and to analyze effectiveness of new approaches, to set operational examples and guides which could be widely adopted to improve the Nation's job training program.

One of the early observations was that disadvantaged persons were not being admitted to the training programs or hired for jobs because they performed poorly on standard psychological tests used widely by vocational counseling agencies and employers. E&D projects sought to determine why

this was so and what to do about it. They found what is common knowledge today -- paper-and-pencil and apparatus tests commonly used as vocational screening devices, by the very nature of their development, have many built-in biases that conspire to severely limit the level of test performance which can be achieved by undereducated persons who generally lack experience in taking tests and exposure to the middle class culture they reflect.

A number of E&D projects have and still are exploring the possibility of developing alternate methods for assessing the vocational potentials of the disadvantaged. Most projects, however, recognized the great cost and time required to develop new assessment approaches, the poor potential for ultimately convincing employers and guidance personnel to drop or change their vocational appraisal instruments, and the great immediate need to enhance test-taking skills for the poor. As a result, a good amount of E&D work has been undertaken to explore how to prepare hard-to-employ individuals for taking employment type tests and related aptitude and intelligence measurement devices. Overall, the E&D experience with so-called "pretest orientation" activities has served to identify difficulties encountered by the disadvantaged in taking tests and potential approaches for alleviating these problems.

THE PROBLEM

Disadvantaged persons usually come to employers and employment agencies to get referred to a job opening and not to participate in testing, counseling and training. The relatively high dropout rate during the first two weeks of manpower programs reflects their rejection of the variety of service activities they do not perceive as helping them get a job.

Their resistance to taking tests is seen in the high "no show" rates after being scheduled for testing. The phenomenon of being threatened by and fearing the taking of tests is not limited to any particular socio-economic class, but is particularly severe among the disadvantaged because

1. they have little experience with testing procedures and, therefore, don't know how to take tests;
2. their few past tries at testing have produced low scores used against them as screening out criteria; and
3. their limited education abilities too often do not permit them to comprehend test content.

The interplay of these circumstances dictate the three basic purposes of "pretest orientation" activities for the disadvantaged:

....to build positive individual attitude toward the need for testing and confidence in taking tests;

....to teach test taking mechanics and procedures; and

....to provide remediation training for upgrading literacy and other abilities to the point necessary to eliminate culture and education bias in test content.

The latter objective is clearly the most difficult to achieve and has been given least attention. It does not lend itself to the fairly quick

and easy panaceas which have been developed to achieve the two former objectives. More importantly, it points to the paradox of building attitude and confidence and procedural know-how in taking tests which themselves substantively are not equally valid in measuring true abilities for members of all ethnic groups. This paradox remaining, testing difficulties of the disadvantaged have been eased through a variety of E&D experiences with pretesting orientation.

ATTITUDE AND CONFIDENCE

Scheduling the disadvantaged person for formal testing individually or in groups must be preceded by experiences which will motivate him to report for testing with minimum fear and suspicion about what the tests will reveal and how they will be used. To facilitate development of positive attitudes toward testing and confidence in one's ability to handle tests, E&D projects have found the following activities to be of value:

1. Fully explain why the tests are given and how they can help.

   The counselor in individual and group sessions should describe tests to be taken and discuss specific ways they can help the applicant. For example, when being considered for a training program the applicant should be shown how test results can help determine the assignments which can best utilize his valuable time. Brief observation of tests during counselor interviews is useful in showing how specific tests have relevance. Also, it is highly desirable for the applicant and counselor to jointly decide on the use of testing for specific reasons.

The counselor should explain to the applicant all aspects of confidentiality of test results, and should assure that such findings will be interpreted to him.

The relevance and significance of tests can be better perceived by the applicant when he learns through visits to companies and discussions with employer representatives about the specific jobs and employers which require the tests.

2. Expose the applicant to nonthreatening test taking.

To bolster the applicant's confidence in taking tests counselors should in small group sessions provide exposure to practice test taking, answer questions in a reassuring and approving manner, check test responses and fully explain errors. It is desirable to have role playing whereby applicants test each other as a means of becoming familiar with tests and furthering their understanding of why they are required.

If applicants tend to be predominantly from a particular ethnic group, it is desirable that persons explaining tests also be representative of the group as a means of enhancing rapport with the applicants and reducing their test resistance.

MECHANICS AND PROCEDURES OF TEST-TAKING

After assisting the disadvantaged person to accept and be motivated for testing, he is ready to learn to improve his knowledge of the mechanics

and procedures on how to take tests (assuming his literacy skills are at least fifth grade level). This has been accomplished by E&D projects in the following ways:

1. Intensive Practice in Test-Taking

   Disadvantaged applicants should, in small groups, be given intensive practice on tests representing the types of test items and instructions they ultimately will face in formal testing. Such test-taking practice concentrates on instruction in how to mark answers on separate test answer sheets, comprehension of various oral and written test directions, and development of speed in working against time. The practice should be conducted in a nonthreatening atmosphere, under standard type testing conditions and, if possible, take place in the same room where formal testing usually occurs.

   Sufficient test-taking practice should be conducted to permit complete familiarization with content of the practice items, ample opportunity for applicants to ask questions and receive full explanations, and allow immediate checking and correction of practice answers. Use should be made of various published materials on how to take tests and of discontinued test forms.

2. Tutoring

   A number of E&D projects have found it useful to provide disadvantaged applicants with various forms of general

test tutoring which are relatively brief (not really education remediation as discussed later). These activities enable applicants to "brush up" on academic and other abilities they have not used for some time.

The most frequent types of tutoring given were practice exercises in arithmetic computation, spelling, grammar, and reading comprehension. Some tutoring centered around the types of logic, concepts and principles underlying tests of verbal analogies, spatial relations and abstract reasoning.

A popular form of tutoring was that of providing applicants with "test-taking hints" on how to choose responses and when to guess on true-false, multiple-choice and matching-answer type tests.

3. Special Curriculums

Some E&D projects have found value in teaching how to take tests by using the Test Orientation Procedure or "TOP" practice test package published by The Psychological Corporation. It consists of a sound tape used in connection with a test workbook during a 30 minute teaching session. The tape recording presents test instructions and practice questions and, after examinees take the tests, reviews the answers. Also, there is a booklet of practice tests which trainees can take and score at home after completing the programmed portion of the course. The TOP tape and booklets

give examinees experience in taking five kinds of objective tests. The tests are designed as instructional materials for practice and familiarization only -- no provision is made for obtaining scores to be interpreted, and the materials can be purchased for use by any type of organization.

One E&D project analyzed the types of questions and underlying principles for all test items on the Bennett Mechanical Comprehension Test and Wonderlic Personnel Test, two very different types of instruments. For each test, a separate pretesting orientation curriculum was developed with special learning units given approximately five hours a week for five weeks. Research conducted showed that the special orientation curriculum increased scores on the Bennett from an average of 18 before orientation to 55 afterwards; and increased scores on the Wonderlic from an average of 11 before orientation to 30 afterwards. The great extent of the gains may be suspect because of small samples and retest practice effect, but they are indicative of the potential value of special instruction curriculums developed around specific types of knowledge required by particular tests.

EDUCATION REMEDIATION

Extensive education remediation training is a necessary component of pretesting orientation for disadvantaged persons with literacy grade levels below fifth grade if they are to ultimately be scheduled to take traditional highly verbal and speeded paper-and-pencil tests. Such tests usually require examinees to have at least sixth grade reading in order to comprehend test content. In addition, without such a level of ability it

is highly doubtful that examinees can be adequately prompted to have sufficient test motivation and confidence or instructed to know the mechanics of taking the tests.

Several E&D projects have served young men 17 to 22 years of age, all of whom were Armed Forces volunteers rejected as unqualified for military service because of academic deficiencies. The projects clearly demonstrated that through classroom training these youth could be upgraded during a brief period to enable them to meet requirements for entrance into the Armed Forces. Coach class training provided youth with special curriculums geared to the types of subject content examined by the Armed Forces Enlistment Screening Test and Armed Forces Qualifications Test. Coach classes were held three nights a week, 2 to 3 hours a night, and were cycled over an 8-week period. Records show that at least 55 percent of the youth enrolled in the coach class training completed the 8-week cycle; 75 percent of those completing training met Armed Forces requirements and enlisted. This program is no longer E&D but now is an ongoing activity at State Employment Service offices.

An E&D project in San Francisco showed the usefulness of a comprehensive one-year program combining pretesting orientation with temporary (trainee) employment, job related remedial education, and special human relations training for job supervisors, as a means of gearing a highly disadvantaged group to achieve permanent employment by qualifying on the Civil Service examination for the Post Office position of Postal Clerk-Carrier. Of the 513 who entered the program, 416 took the exam within a year after entrance and 263 passed; the average program cost per success was $235.

The 513 temporary employees were hired without being tested and without reference to educational qualifications. Their special status as "Worker-Trainees" expired after one year by which time they had to pass the regular Civil Service examination to remain employed. They attended pretest orientation and remedial education classes (without pay) two hours a day, five days each week. Average literacy level for the group at hire was less than 6th grade. Pretest orientation sessions utilized several published texts on how to pass the Postal Clerk-Carrier exam, as well as intensive test taking practice in following test instructions, using answer sheets, and learning to work under time pressure.

The significance of the San Francisco project is that it showed the feasibility and value of utilizing temporary employment as a motivator for achievement in both education and test taking skills to prepare the disadvantaged for qualifying on a Civil Service exam initially beyond their capability. This effort is no longer E&D but is now a regular activity of the manpower program in San Francisco.

CONCLUSIONS

Pretest orientation can enhance ability of the disadvantaged for test taking. However, the appropriate methods for and scope of such activity will vary depending on the character of the vocational test to be taken and the education status and testing experience of the job applicants.

The E&D work does not support common notions that pretesting orientation is a one-shot hour long activity focused on general test taking considerations. Rather, it should be an extended experience in which the examinee

must develop trust in those who are giving the test and skills in the specific types of test directions, questions and content which he will ultimately face in formal testing.

Finally, let's not forget the paradox I cited earlier.